

Education needs to get it right for a tsunami generation

Mark Eggleton - 05 Jun 2013 00:33:22



Job security and the ability to plan for life long term are antiquated concepts to today's youth. **Photo: Wayne Taylor**

[Share](#)

Young Australians taking their first steps into the workforce are entering one of the most economically unsettled periods in history. Technology changes disrupt business everywhere, but the aftermath of the global financial crisis continues to affect many of the sectors, such as retail and hospitality that traditionally are strong employers of young people. What's more, the old vocational institutions and

anchors of stability seem to be disappearing as companies cut training programs and there is a disconnect between the education system and the world of work.

At first glance, the global prognosis for the young is pretty gloomy. The long tail of the GFC continues to work its way through economies in dire need of reform. Almost 300 million young people aged 15 to 24 are out of work and in some developed countries, such as Spain and Italy, youth unemployment is close to 40 per cent.

Many of the world's largest companies have moved their manufacturing bases to developing countries and while young people in richer nations might be staying in education longer, much of that education fails to prepare them adequately for employment.

Back on these shores, the young jobless rate ticks over fairly consistently at more than three times the level of all adults. Full-time work is declining as casual and part-time work rises. This translates to a large rump of underemployed people. As well, the rise of part-time and casual work is seeing people change jobs more often as they search for more hours.

Associate professor Lucas Walsh of Monash University's Faculty of Education says we're seeing people's life stages happening later as they don't have a fluid working life.

"Security isn't coming at the end of study. Moreover, a recent University of Melbourne study found the whole flexible hours' work phenomenon – the idea of fragmented work – is fundamentally affecting people's ability to plan a

life long term.”

Walsh believes Australia’s high level of long-term youth unemployment (compared to OECD averages) isn’t being seriously addressed by business and government leaders who have turned it into a partisan debate. Business and government could do a lot more if they worked together to create alternative training pathways beyond just school and a fairly rigid style of higher education, because what we have at the moment is just not working.

The chief executive of the Foundation for Young Australians, Jan Owen, says this generation of the nation’s young is being swamped by a tsunami of change.

“They’re caught between the old and the new world,” Ms Owen says.

Owen says the FYA exists to ensure young Australians have the necessary tools for the future.

“We want to make sure they have the skills to navigate the world of work and learning. We want to become a nation of job creators, not job seekers, and we want young Australians to be confident in a regional and global context,” Owen says. She believes to best prepare people for a changing world there has to be a massive change in how we educate our young people.

“It’s education 3.0 where people will package up their own education and it will be better integrated with community and industry needs. The big question will be who gets access, which is why it’s imperative to get the Gonski

reforms right. We have to immerse kids in education that is relevant.”

Yet while education needs to change, Monash’s Walsh says when he speaks to those in industry about what they really want from today’s students and tomorrow’s workforce, they don’t really know.

“Sure, employers want literacy and numeracy, but they also say they want soft skills such as problem-solving, communication skills, cross-cultural knowledge and digital literacy. The problem is neither business or government have ever really tried to develop them,” Walsh says.

He worries that while business and government talk of producing a generation of smart workers more tightly engaged with the region, it’s mostly rhetoric. For example, last year only 6 per cent of Year 12 students studied an Asian language, which is quite alarming considering our dress-circle location in the region.

“We need to ensure one of the core features of education is for young people to have an understanding of the cultural sensitivities of the region, and this needs to be physically built into the curriculum.”

The FYA’s careers education manager, Aidan McLaren, says we need to enable young people to be future-focused learners and that means much closer ties between education and the world of work.

“Careers education and careers exploration needs to be better understood in schools and it needs to be embedded

into the curriculum. We need to get more employers to offer more work-experience opportunities.” McLaren says.

He cites the FYA’s World of Work program, which involves school students going out into workplaces for five days to learn about the skills they’ll need to thrive in the working world.

The beauty of the program is it allows students to talk to people in real work situations at major companies such as Shell, IBM and NAB, rather than getting their information through the lens of parents or teachers.

Conversely, it gives employers insight into the mindset of young Australians.

And what employers are finding is today’s young generation is exceedingly socially aware. Young people are a lot worldlier than they are given credit for. Speaking at Aon Hewitt’s Best Employers 2013 presentation last week, judge Andrea Grant said the best employers realise young people have a strong social conscience.

Jan Owen says in the past 25 years she hasn’t seen a generation of young people that is more galvanised around ideas and issues. “They’re able to mobilise so quickly around an issue by utilising online communities and taking their message local and global. They have real aspirations to create change.

“We’re on the cusp of a real inter--generational transfer of trust, leadership and resources.” What we’re doing at the FYA is unleashing the drive, talent and ideas of today’s

young people into the community.”

According to Walsh, the future is not necessarily gloomy, as the current generation of young -Australians is resourceful and adaptable. “They take it as a given that they won’t have a clear career trajectory as they anticipate a whole lot more change is to come.”

The Australian Financial Review